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Student perceptions of feedback: seeking a coherent flow

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Abstract

The importance of feedback to student progression and retention has gained prominence in the literature over the past few years. A number of concerns have been raised about the quality and quantity of student feedback, and the variability across and within institutions. The aim of this study was to examine student perceptions of the utility of timely feedback, and staff intentions for feedback, in relation to a number of factors in the first and final years of a student's academic experience. A focus group study was carried out at three UK higher education institutions. Eighteen first-year (Level 1) and 20 final-year (Level 3) undergraduates and 14 academic staff participated in 14 groups. Digital recordings were transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis employed to systematically code for themes across the data. Three main themes were identified:

- time and timeliness;
- communication; and
- student/tutor expectations.

Findings suggest that there is a mismatch between the expectations of both students and tutors in terms of what can realistically be achieved within the pressures of other commitments. Students require feedback to be timely, specific and preferably delivered through individual tutorials. The creation of a 'feedback chain' or overview of their overall progress was also suggested. They need more assistance with learning how to learn in higher education, preferably subject specific approaches.

Keywords

Focus groups; perceptions of feedback.

Introduction

Feedback is very closely linked with student achievement, retention and progression (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; Yorke, 2003). As student numbers have increased, there have been economies of scale in teaching methods but not in assessment. This has placed extreme pressure on assessment practices in all subject areas, with the result that provision of both timely and valuable feedback to students is far more difficult to achieve. It is not just the quality and quantity of feedback provided to students that is important. It is also the value of this feedback to students and more importantly, what they do with it, as research suggests that feedback is often not read at all or not understood (Brown, 2001; Gibbs and Simpson, 2002).

Feedback is mentioned in seven of the eleven conditions for assessment to enhance student learning (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004 in Segers et al., 2008). Moreover, studies have found that feedback produces 'the most powerful single effect on achievement' (Hattie, 1987, cited in Rushton, 2005: 509). How students perceive and interpret feedback and how they use it, if at all, are central to this debate. Higgins et al. (2002) have challenged the notion that students behave as consumers in the current context of higher education, and are only interested in grades. While this might be the case for some students, other factors, such as the impact of modularisation and increased workloads for students and tutors are recognised as contributing to difficulties. The effect these factors have on communication in general, and feedback in particular, is acknowledged elsewhere (Miller, Imrie and Cox, 1998).

The two-way communication process between the tutor and learner is recognised as key to student perceptions and utilisation of feedback. The difficulty of communicating feedback comments based on tutors' tacit knowledge 'that which we know but cannot tell' (Polanyi, 1967 in Elander 2003: 117) is well documented (see for example, Elander 2003; Higgins et al., 2002; Rushton, 2005). Elander (2003) has attempted to uncover the implicit approaches taken by teaching staff to assessment marking, and suggests the issue of tacit knowledge requires further attention because it excludes students from proper engagement with their learning.

Assessment feedback is a unique and complex form of communication, and Higgins et al. (2001:271) suggest that 'issues of discourse, identity, power, control and social relationships' need to be addressed if an understanding of this communication process is to be gained. Hinett also explores issues of power, control and the emotional well-being of students. This aspect of students' emotional investment in their education highlights the 'power differential' inherent in 'tutor-led' assessment, which can affect students' self-image (2002:178). Students invest emotionally in their work; Higgins et al. (2001) question how much is understood by students when feedback uses abstract concepts and is based on implicit understandings by tutors.

Thus, the importance of effective communication processes between tutor and student, and the effect this may have on progression, cannot be underestimated. The link between formative assessment and retention rates has been made by Yorke, and in particular the 'dialogic' nature of this approach (2001:117). However, regardless of the literature demonstrating the benefits of formative assessment, summative assessment remains the most common form of assessment in higher education today.

These issues need to be understood within the context of assessment in general in HE. Hinett (2002) raises questions about the nature of assessment in this context. She undertakes this critique within the framework of developments in higher education, in which 'knowledge is traded as a commodity and degrees are the global currency' (2002:173).

Assessment on this basis seems to have 'two competing functions – 'resource and reputation' and 'talent development' (Astin, 1993, in Hinett, 2002:173) which raises concerns about its overall efficacy. If assessment is about accountability and about student development, it is argued that the necessity of quantitative measurable outcomes for the former leads to the necessity of failure for the latter (Hinett, 2002). There is a tension between doing what is best for administration purposes as opposed to what is best for student learning. Rushton suggests that while it is claimed there has been a 'paradigm shift in assessment culture' where the value of formative assessment is recognised and valued (2005:509), there is little evidence that this shift has occurred in reality. Yorke argues that there is not much in terms of a theoretical framework in the literature related to student assessment and therefore the reliability and validity of 'summative assessment of student learning is as a consequence seriously compromised' (2001:117). There is general agreement across the literature that summative assessment is 'high stakes' and students are aware that with summative assessment there is no room for error (Yorke, 2001:143).

Feedback is central to the student's learning experience and can motivate and encourage students through initial transition and transition throughout their degree course. However, a number of concerns have been raised about the quality and quantity of student feedback and the variability across and within institutions (Higgins et al., 2002). The purpose of this study was to examine student perceptions of the utility of timely feedback, and staff intentions for feedback, in relation to a number of factors in the first and final year of a student's academic experience. These factors include:

- mode of feedback;
- quality;
- quantity;
- levels of understanding; and
- usefulness.

The study was a collaborative project between three very similar higher education institutions in terms of their mission and size, yet different in terms of their student body and curriculum design.

Focus group interviews were used to collect qualitative data relating to student and staff perceptions of feedback on assessment. Focus groups are a highly efficient method of collecting qualitative data (Patton, 2002) and are particularly suited for obtaining several perspectives about the same topic.

Analysis of the focus group data was carried out using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke argue that thematic analysis 'offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data' (2006:77). Using a 'top-down' approach, themes drawn from the literature review were systematically identified in the data. This allowed an examination of a number of issues relating to feedback such as timeliness, quality, understanding and perceptions of feedback. The overall aim was to identify key themes that best summarised the staff and students' experience of feedback on assessment.

Method

Using focus groups, the experiences and perceptions of academic staff and first and third year students were examined at three higher education institutions over a period of six weeks in three discipline areas: sport science, media and business and history.

Disadvantages of using focus groups include:

- distortion of the data;
- untruthful answers;
- withholding information due to pressures or fears; and
- facilitators mismanaging the group.

Advantages of using focus groups include: the dynamic interaction of the participants;

- the opportunity of the moderator to probe;
- high 'face validity';
- low cost;
- speedy results; and
- larger sample sizes (Krueger and Casey, 2000:34–36).

Participants

A convenience sample of 18 first-year and 20 third-year undergraduates, all full-time students, and 14 academic staff from across three higher education institutions, participated in this study. The students were recruited in a variety of ways; leaflets, online advertising and through direct appeals at the beginning of lectures. Recruitment of the volunteers was organised and conducted by the research project coordinator at each institution.

Procedure

Focus groups were carried out with undergraduate students and groups of staff over a period of 6 weeks, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Focus groups.

College	No of focus groups	Groups	Facilitated by
A	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• First-year students, sports science• Final-year students, sports science• First-year students, media• Group interview with staff	Level 2 Sociology students
B	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• First-year students, management• Final-year students, management• Final-year students, history• Group interview with staff	Level 2 Psychology students
C	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• First-year students, media and business students• First-year students, sports science• Final-year students, sports science• First-year students, business• Final-year students, history• Final year students, marketing (two groups)• Final-year students, media• Group interview with staff.	Level 2 Psychology students

All student facilitators were guided and supervised by a member of academic staff.

Ethical applications were approved at each of the participating institutions. Participants were asked to complete consent forms before participating and were made aware of the ethical issues associated with their participation (i.e., confidentiality of responses, anonymity, the right to withdraw at any time, and debriefing).

After obtaining informed consent, participants were asked to respond to a number of questions relating to feedback. The participants were made aware that the focus group discussion would be recorded. Focus groups lasted between 20 minutes and 75 minutes and all groups proceeded until the participants offered no further information.

Dinsdale (2002) states that focus groups are not predictable and questions need not be pre-determined, which allows for flexibility. All student facilitators were provided with a semi-structured interview schedule that included suggestions for prompts, but they were also encouraged to use their initiative when responding to group processes. The intention was to use ‘medium level moderation’ (Cronin, 2001:166) in which the researcher moderates in a flexible manner according to the dynamics of the group.

The semi-structured interview schedule was developed using open-ended questions around core themes.

These themes were informed by a literature review conducted by Level 2 psychology students at College C and subsequent discussions with the psychology tutor at College C. The questions were designed to be 'jargon free' and easily understood. The interview schedule followed the sequence as recommended by Krueger and Casey (2000), starting with questions designed to encourage participants to start talking and then moving to key questions about the topic of interest.

The facilitators were encouraged to ensure that the discussion remained on the topic of interest while keeping their contribution to the discussion at a minimum. The data was transcribed verbatim, only what was said was transcribed, non-linguistic features of speech were not noted. Students and administrative staff carried out transcription across the three sites.

Data analysis

All transcribed data were shared across the three sites and the three staff researchers undertook the initial coding separately. In subsequent meetings, the researchers discussed their initial coding and a more focused coding of the initial themes revealed three main themes. Braun and Clarke suggest a useful 'guide through the six phases of analysis', although they emphasise that the process is not 'linear' but 'recursive' with 'movement back and forth as needed, throughout the phases' (2006:86, authors' emphasis). From each transcript, all data was identified that related to the factors of interest. Braun and Clarke stress the active role of the researcher in 'identifying patterns/themes, selecting which are of interest, and reporting them to the reader' (2006:80).

Findings

The purpose of the present research was to examine student perceptions of the utility of timely feedback, and staff intentions for feedback, in relation to a number of factors in the early and latter stages of a student's academic experience. Three main themes were identified:

- time and timeliness;
- communication; and
- student-tutor expectations.

Time and timeliness

Timeliness and consequent usefulness of feedback has been identified elsewhere. For example, Higgins et al. (2002:53) explore the 'meaning and impact' of assessment feedback for students. They challenge the notion that students are only interested in their grades, producing evidence of students' engagement with, and expectations of, good quality feedback, with timeliness an important feature. Gibbs (1999) suggests that feedback has to happen soon after the learning activity to be effective. However, factors such as increased workloads and rising student numbers can pose a challenge to all but the most committed tutors. Unfortunately, any interest or engagement from students' perspective can be undermined by lengthy delays between submission and receiving feedback, especially when a module has ended and students already know they have passed. Gibbs (1999:46) states that:

'Providing feedback on students work is one of the most expensive components in their education but it is often not an effective investment simply because it happens too slowly.'

This was evident in the following:

I had to wait maybe two months to get it ... already had the results ... (L1 Media, College A)

Two months ... I've got my result back ... I've not got the feedback (L1 Sport, College C)

While there is some evidence of coursework being turned around quickly, most students in the study felt that even two to three weeks was too long:

*... because by the time you're getting feedback from one essay you've already started another so you can't really take the feedback and use it in a productive way.
(L1 Media, College A)*

Some students had experienced long delays in the return of a diagnostic piece of work handed out at the beginning of the year:

It took ages ... about two months ... by that time I guess you had forgotten ... we had already wrote (sic) another essay. (L1 Media, College B)

The issue of timeliness has been identified as problematic across all three sites and the consequences are exemplified in the following:

Some things are a bit annoying when you've had things from the first semester and you're waiting for a mark back but you've gotta start on the next bit of work which is pretty much similar then you don't really wanna start ... 'cause the feedback you get from the last piece might say, y'know, do this better and different points ... (L3 student, Sport, College B)

There is evidence here of what Higgins et al. terms 'the conscientious consumer' (2002: 53), where students engage with the feedback in order to develop deeper learning of the subject. This was also apparent in what students do with the feedback they receive. Some file it away while most of the students interviewed tried to use it to improve their work, especially if they had received a poor grade.

Students enter higher education with certain expectations of the quality of feedback they will receive, and mentioned the importance of structured and specific feedback, but sometimes what they get gives a sense of work being rushed:

... like they've just read it through and gone ra ra ra ... it is so vague ... I liked what you did in this paragraph ... watch your punctuation ... you can't see exactly where you're going right and wrong (L1 Media and Management, College A)

... the only feedback you got was like a tick-box, yes or no, for your work, and it wasn't really sufficient, so I dropped it (second subject) (L3, Sport Science, College A)

However, students are aware of departmental policy on turn around times for marking of coursework, and some students tolerated long delays in receiving feedback and were often sympathetic to lecturers:

*Well it's not just our work they're assessing, you know if you look at the teacher's point of view, they've got other students and other subjects they're teaching as well
(L1 Management Studies, College B)*

Communication: clarity and confusion

The quality of feedback is tied in with how feedback is communicated, which is often marred by confusion on the part of the students. These issues are very much connected to individual tutors' approaches to feedback. Concerns arose in two main areas:

- written feedback in the form of specific comments and/or use of marking sheets with tick boxes; and
- verbal feedback.

Evidence of the variability of feedback has already been noted above (Higgins et al., 2002). The issue of staff and student workloads and how this impinges on the communication processes is also an important factor and one that is evidenced by this research.

The use of marking sheets with room for comments at the bottom was used in all three sites, although there were some exceptions, especially marking done by visiting or hourly paid lecturers. Students valued written feedback if it contained specific comments related to their work. Some students received detailed feedback and especially appreciated comments written on the essay itself, while others only got 'a little scrawl' (L1, Media College A).

There were numerous examples of problems with students not being able to decipher tutor's writing. The use of Progress Tutors by College C to communicate feedback to students was often unhelpful, as they also found some tutors' feedback illegible and did not necessarily have enough subject knowledge to decipher the meaning. There were some methods used to overcome this, such as typed feedback, but the most effective means of communication was verbal feedback by the module tutor. The students regarded this particularly highly as it represented quality time and individual attention, as well as a resource to support them in their learning.

If the student can get past the obstacle of deciphering the writing, there may still be confusion as to whether their interpretation is correct. This bewilderment is also apparent when it comes to the marking sheets, as was expressed through a discussion in a Level 3 focus group (College C). Participants agreed that terms such as 'clear and concise' are unhelpful if not related to a particular aspect of the coursework. Similarly with tick boxes, it is often unclear whether this relates to the whole piece of work or just one aspect. One student dropped a module because the tick box feedback was insufficient (L3, Management, College A). Fundamentally, they want to know exactly where they went wrong and how they can improve. In terms of understanding the feedback, the following response illustrates the need for verbal explanations to clarify meanings:

When it (feedback) was written I didn't understand it, but obviously you make the appointment to follow through on that and she clarifies what she means ... reference, I didn't know where I'd gone wrong, what she meant, and she explained it, broke it down ... (L1, Sport College A)

Feedback provided by the module tutor in a one to one session was valued above all other feedback, as students felt they could take it in more effectively in this context.

I think one-to-one sessions with individual lecturers is important ... because they know where you can do better and where you can improve. (L3, Management, College C)

However, not all students felt able to approach tutors in this way, some because of lack of availability of part-time staff, but of more concern:

It's time consuming and it's just bothering ... and even if it did help, it just never happens. (L3 Sports, College B)

Staff who participated in the research made it very clear that they were available through office hours, tutorials and offers of one-to-one personalised feedback. Some offered an open door policy in which students could drop by at any time. Staff expressed frustration at the number of students who did not use these opportunities. However, they also spoke of the pressure of huge workloads, teaching large cohorts which resulted in excessive amounts of marking, as well as administrative duties, and the difficulties of balancing the varying demands on their time. Students appear to notice these unspoken cues, which communicate the stress of this workload:

You just feel bad approaching them because you know they're busy people ... you don't want to feel like a burden. (L1 Media, College A)

Tutor/student expectations

The comments outlined above illustrate perhaps the complexity of the tutor/student relationship. As identified by Higgins et al. (2001) feedback is not a straightforward procedure, based as it is on a communication process within a particular relationship, one that appears to be inherently difficult:

'... the feedback process is particularly problematic because of the particular nature of the power relationship. The tutor occupies the dual role of both assisting and passing judgement on the student. This is therefore bound up with issues of power and, as Layder (1997) suggests, inextricably with emotion. For example, the tutor's expert position confers their "judgements" with an elevated status, which enhances the power of these judgements to invoke feelings such as pride and shame.' (in Higgins et al., 2001: 273).

Encountering tutors across a number of different modules, often with competing discourses, complicates this further, increasing the confusion that students experience in a new environment, and this was evident in all three sites. In College B, there was some confusion over different feedback procedures:

Student 1: There's only that subject that does the feedback like he does ...

Student 2: Yeah ...

Student 1: The rest just give you your essay...

Student 2: Yeah, with that sheet that don't (sic) make much sense (L1, Media, College B)

Different approaches to marking as well as expectations of what constituted a piece of written work were also problematic, often compounding students' confusion and creating unnecessary tension during their first year. A third-year student, reflecting back, said:

... they do have different marking systems ... that was a bit confusing. It was confusing because in one subject your quotes are not included but in the other they are included ... and that threw me a bit in L1 (L3, History, College B).

While it is unrealistic to expect all subjects to have exactly the same requirements of students, the argument for improved induction procedures that are subject-specific, as proposed by Wingate (2007) gains credibility.

Although there is evidence that some feedback on assessment is of poor quality and quantity, most lecturers interviewed put time and effort into marking and organising feedback sessions. Tutors recognise the value of one-to-one feedback, invite students along, and then spend additional time trying to find solutions to the problem of non-attendance. Indeed, time is a crucial factor for tutors, and a constant theme throughout the interviews. They spend time in meetings discussing new strategies for feedback until they 'drive themselves crazy' (Tutor 4, College A).

Often it is the students who need feedback most who do not attend these sessions. It could be assumed that there is a lack of concern on the student's behalf, but as one tutor discovered when questioning why students had not come to collect their work:

... they're frightened, really. They're frightened that they're not going to have done it very well and they don't want to hear that. They'd rather hide their head in the sand. (College C)

This is evidence of the issues raised by Elander (2003), Hinett (2002) and Higgins et al. (2001, 2002), which suggests that it may have more to do with issues of self-esteem, power differentials, and discourses. Nevertheless, tutors struggling with already heavy workloads, including the large amount of time and

effort it takes to mark students' work, do not necessarily have time to consider these issues. They feel frustrated when students do not take the time to come for feedback, or show evidence of using it to improve their work:

Tutor 1: I don't see much carry over for the feedback we give, it's really frustrating when you make the same comments on hundreds of pieces of work and then second year, they're still making the same mistakes. I think they think the feedback is specific to that piece of work. Here's your feedback, the module's done, I'll do a new module and I won't carry that feedback over. (College A, Sports Science)

*Tutor 4: There's not a lot more we can do with providing feedback; we provide timetabled slots to come and receive exam transcripts, we bring them into lectures, practically force-feeding them this stuff, so I think we more than fulfil our side of it ... and we just want them to meet us halfway ... So we try and think of new ways, but maybe we need to understand from the students' point of view **what they want** and how they want us to get the feedback to them; maybe that's something, maybe online feedback would be the way forward, I don't know ... (College A, Sports Science) (my emphasis)*

What do students want?

Students across all three institutions, when asked what they need from feedback, agreed on six main issues:

1. **Typed feedback** The need for typed feedback to improve understandings of handwritten text, with a copy given to students to keep.

Typed would be good...clear points about what's good and what's bad...(L3, College C)

2. **Feedback on exams** Students stated:

*They should give you feedback on exams (L3, College C),
and furthermore that tutors should have
... marked the exam ... see where you went wrong... (L1, College A)*

3. **Specific, structured and clear feedback** There were also requests for feedback to be:

- 'specific' (L1, College B);
- 'structured' (L3, College B); and
- to contain 'clear points about what's good and what's bad' (L3, College C)
- examples such as 'a model of an essay' (L1, C) would also be useful in understanding what is regarded as 'good work'.

4. **Face-to-face feedback** Students expressed a need for face-to-face feedback; 'one-on-one' (L1, College C), 'a follow-up session' (L3, College A), and 'verbal feedback' (L3, College B). They want timetabled meetings rather than 'drop-in' sessions. Some departments in College C return feedback via the students' progress tutor. This has had varying success, notably that many students prefer to discuss the feedback with the marker rather than with their progress tutor, particularly joint honours students who want feedback from the tutor in each subject area

'... they can't normally explain it ... when, y'know if you get a question about sports, if, my progress tutor is on the sports side, if there was something about media and I got an essay back that went through them and there's no-one on that side to explain certain points' (College C, L3).

5. **Feedback chain** Students in College C (L3) suggested having a review that connects 'a sort of string of work together' from the previous semester/year, a 'feedback chain' (L3, C). Similarly in College A, there was a suggestion for a system where students could access all their feedback and grades, compare across modules and identify areas for improvement. This type of overview could identify consistent errors, and provide a sense of achievement and recognition of progress. Students want to do well, they want to be recognised but they need the correct support to achieve this.
6. **Technical help** Students across all three sites agreed on the need for feedback on 'technical things ... how to find sources' (L1, College A) and 'how to reference' (L1, C). Wingate (2007:394) has argued that higher education institutions need to be explicit about 'learning to learn' in university, but not through generic skills modules that are 'decontextualised'. Rather, there is a need to provide 'discipline-specific' support for students.

While there was a high level of consistency in the findings from the three institutions, some differences were identified with College C. There were some difficulties expressed with the use of progress tutors, and a group of international students discussed the need for extra support, such as 'separate tutorials' (L1, College C) to clarify any confusion related to understanding lectures.

Conclusion

The quality and quantity of feedback needs to be **relevant, specific** and **understandable** and the **timing** of feedback is crucial. For most students interviewed, the time frame within which it is possible to learn from, and apply, feedback from one piece of work to another is narrow, particularly within a single module. Changes need to occur to move away from the frustrating cycle of reams of unread feedback, or 'hundreds of essays that are never going to see the light of day' (Tutor, College A). This equates to hundreds of hours of wasted time and effort, in an already stretched and stressed workplace.

These changes should incorporate what students want, as identified above. For example, timetabled, face-to face feedback sessions with tutors could be introduced. These might include regular (termly) sessions to review students' assessed work and identify overall progress, as well as targeting areas for improvement. To make these sessions effective, students need to understand what is expected of them and they need to understand the academic discourse of the discipline (Wingate, 2007:394).

Studies have demonstrated that helping students understand marking criteria is crucial to their learning experience. These studies suggest that grades were 'significantly improved' by engaging students in using assessment criteria to mark peer or sample work, and could also improve understanding and increase confidence (Rust, 2003; Orsmond et al., 2000 and Bostock, 2000, cited in Bloxham and West, 2004).

Examples of this kind of research include that undertaken by Harrington and Elander (2003), who gave students the opportunity to mark sample work, after in-depth discussion of assessment criteria in seminar groups. However, findings from this research were not all positive, perhaps because this exercise was introduced as part of a generic skills module, as opposed to discipline-specific. Nevertheless, other research (Rust, 2003; Orsmond et al, 2000 and Bostock, 2000, cited in Bloxham and West, 2004) indicates that helping students understand marking criteria is crucial to their learning experience. These studies suggest that grades were 'significantly improved' by engaging students in using assessment criteria to mark peer or sample work, and could also improve comprehension and increase confidence.

If we understand assessment processes as inherently about communication, we can enable students to comprehend the language and culture of higher education, through innovative approaches such as those suggested above. Careful preparation is needed to introduce novel approaches to assessment and feedback, and further exploration is needed of the outcomes of any such innovations.

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